

This essay concerns a semiotic analysis of advertisements whose similarity is based on the fact that all concern the advertising of men's fragrances, and all were found in the within the textual context of print advertising.

In more specific terms, the advertised products included Dune, Polo Extreme Sport, Xeryus Rouge, and Cool Water. The adverts were located within recent editions of the popular men's magazines, namely *Sky*, *FHM*, and *Esquire*. Thus this essay will individually analyse these advertisements in terms of their status as signs, whose associative meanings not only gave a favourable impression of the product, but were also compatible with, and complementary to, the masculine context in which they were situated; thus illustrating Umberto Eco's claim that the medium and message may be 'charged with cultural signification.'

Although all of the advertisements do not physically represent the product, they all provide an important iconic representation of both the product and what the product, should stand for. Thus, analysis of all of the adverts will strongly focus upon the advertisements' photographic imagery, and the ways in which this imagery generates the appropriate signified concepts (or emotional overtones) which promote the image of the product.



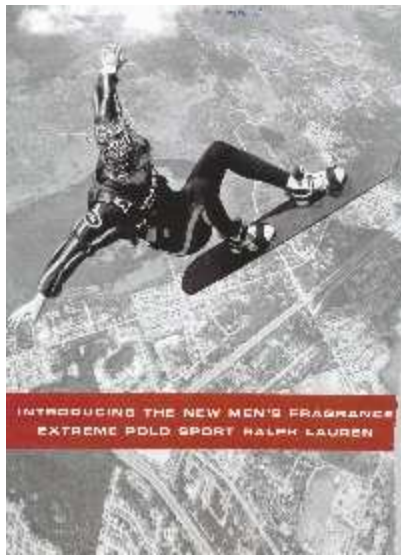
The first advert, ('Example A') strongly relies upon this use of photographic imagery. 'Example A' features an advertisement for the fragrance 'Dune Pour Homme.' The advertisement uses a variety of signifiers which publicise both the identity of the brand, 9 and an image which is in line with the ideology of the text in which it appears, which, in this case, is the youthful, glamorous *Sky* magazine. The advert predominately features a male model in his early to mid twenties, and he is kneeling on a sand dune. Adjacent to him is an iconic image of the product itself, which is projected as being disproportionately large. Underneath this image of the product are the words: 'Essence Of Freedom,'

and together these separate components form an effective and unified message. On a simple level it is easy to deduce two obvious things. Firstly, that the subject, (the image of the man) provides a youthful element of glamour, which serves both the product and the text in which it is being advertised, and secondly, that the image of the sand dune is a physical reiteration of the product name. However, the more interesting semiotic elements of the advert exist within its notion of freedom, which is the advert's primary signified concept.

The notion of freedom is 'primarily conveyed by the image of this lone man; who, in his lonesome location; seems extremely at ease, and unrestricted by normal life, thus providing a sense of liberation which is also conveyed by his loose, unorthodox, clothing. Furthermore the softly focused quality of the photography, and the advertisements colouring of gentle blues and pale browns. are further signifiers which contribute to this dreamy, utopian image of liberation.

However, these images alone certainly do not convey this central signified concept, for this is only guaranteed by the inclusion of the advertisements of the statement: 'essence of freedom.' Thus, a strong relationship is allowed to be forged between the 'signifiers,' (the photographic image of the protagonist and his physical environment) and the 'signified' which is the linguistically expressed 'essence of freedom.' Therefore, this stabilisation between the signifier and the signified allows for the creation of a plausible commodity code.' This code attributes basic meaning to the advert, whose conventional combination of iconic image and linguistic representation (of words and pictures) allows the recipient to receive a message, which is justified and reiterated by the relationships of resemblance at play.

Thus, although the average reader of *Sky Magazine* will not be aware of the terms discussed, or the technicalities of this process, he or she will still be aware of the mutually complementary relationship between words and imagery. This relationship not only ensures the advert's uniform message, it also ensures the advert's plausibility: For it is the adverts typically obvious contrivance between word and image which allows the recipient to view the advert within its generic context. For only within this genre does the ridiculous image of a man wearing pyjamas and after-shave in a desert maintain an element of acceptability. Therefore it is arguable that this acceptability would not be guaranteed if one sign, wasn't reinforced by the other, if for example the advertisement was presented merely as a photograph in its own right, without a written statement, contextualising and clarifying the photographs meaning. Finally, it is also worthwhile to note that the advertisement sense of balance is matched by its compatibility with the textual context in which it arises. This compatibility can be illustrated by referring back to the colours of the advert, which consist of sensuous and softly focused blues and whites and browns. Although Sky magazine is read by men, unlike the other magazines in this analysis, Sky is proudly unisex, and it is the feminine colours in the advert, which depict a sign which is designed to be compatible with the intended recipients of it.



Reflecting the emphasis which the sign attributes to being reflective of the textual context in which it is situated, is 'Example B' which is an advertisement for 'Extreme Polo sport by Ralph Lauren. As its name suggests, this is a fragrance which is designed to be strongly reflective of

masculinity, and it is of no surprise that the advert is featured in the opening pages of *FHM* which is a staunchly male publication. Emphasising the products distinct masculinity is a distinct set of signs, which are carefully orchestrated to convey a relevant and unified message. Unlike the Dune advert, the Extreme Polo Sport advertisement is neither subtle or artistic, and nor does it attempt to construct a plausible relationship between the product and a prescribed emotion such as 'freedom.' Instead, the advert presents a simple iconic image of the product, and iconic image of the subject who is shown to be a skydiver. We are not explicitly told of the emotional association which the subject is supposed to bring to the product, but we can deduce that he can excel in the demands of physical extremity, thus allowing us to form our own emotional associations with the brand, associations which will undoubtedly be complicit with the gender of the subject, the masculinity of the magazine, and the masculinity of the sport on show.

Hence the product is allowed to speak for itself, as is portrayed by the blunt, practical copy: 'Introducing the new men's fragrance Extreme Polo Sport Ralph Lauren' it states, and who would argue with that? Interestingly, the only thing that links the subject with the copy is the fact that they are situated on the same page, for the actual iconic representation of the product itself is shown on an adjacent but entirely separate page. Although the advert projects a strong relationship between the product and the machismo of the subject, the fact that the two images exist in separate environments, respectfully understates this link, attributing the recipients with the intelligence to form it for themselves. Furthermore, the fact that iconic resemblance of the product is far larger than the subject, allows us to view the product as an entity in its own right, therefore placating our masculine sense of practicality.

Although this advert appears to be simple, its connotative meanings allow our interpretation of it to be a pragmatic one, in that its signifiers have particular relevance with regards to the context of the advert. One such group of signifiers is the advertisement's colours. Unlike the subtle feminine colours of the Dune advert, the Extreme Polo Sport is consists of a bold, aggressive colour scheme of black) white, red and dark blue; and together with the silvery, metallic appearance of the product, this colour scheme serves as a significant group of signifiers which attribute the brand with the same sense of masculinity which is projected by the subject, and the context (the magazine') Hence, the role and importance of this colour scheme in both adverts shows that these colours are part of an organised system of signifiers who form significant cultural and aesthetic codes. In the case of the 'Extreme Polo Sport' advert, this code Mows the product to appear to be as indicative of masculinity, of the masculinity of the subject, and the masculinity of the recipient (the reader of *FHM*). In order to clarify this point, the aesthetic code which implies that red, black and silver, are masculine colours, is the same code which implies that pink and white symbolise femininity and purity. The notable absence of both colours in example B and the omnipresence of these colours in Example C illustrates this point:



Example C features an advert for 'Anais-Anais' of the Cacharel brand. Found within Sky magazine, this is an advert for women's perfume. Significantly, the primary colours in this advert are pink and white: we are presented with the alluring white complexion of the female subject, and the pink appearance of the iconic image of the brand, - it's hardly a coincidence. Therefore, although this advert should only be viewed as a comparative aside, it is still significant, because when it is compared to the comparative colouring scheme of the 'Example B', it serves to illustrate how colour is often a signifying element, and therefore an integral part of a signs aesthetic codes which portray 'a set of values shared by the producers and readers of a text' (Thwaites *et al.*).

In order to develop this theme of the role of the shared values of the producers and readers of a text, it is relevant to discuss the emphasis which is attributed to the advertising of the product in a way which is relevant to the cultural experience and expectations of the consumer. Again, 'Example B'- (the advertisement for 'Extreme Polo Sport') provides a strong illustration. Ralph

Lauren is western brand predominately marketed and used in the west, as is the magazine in which the advertisement appears. Predictably, the advert exhibits strongly western overtones, and this is evident through its subject, and through its copy. The Subject is not only white, and wearing the clothes of the same American retailer, he is also engaged in the sport of 'sky surfing', which originated in America, and is largely practised there. Similarly, the copy, with its computerised, industrial looking font, is also indicative of the artistry of an advanced western culture. Therefore, by implying Myers's argument that 'symbols are can only be understood by those who share are culture' this same logic dictates that this advert was constructed with the aim of targeting the product at an audience familiar with, and sympathetic to, its relevant cultural signifiers.

Thus 'Example B' is a strong example of the way an advert uses shared prior cultural experience to attribute meaning to its symbolic representation of the product. Furthermore, this example reiterates the various levels of meaning which are present in a sign, as was most predominately argued by Barthes. Using Barthes' concepts, it is possible to summarise the significance of the implicit cultural overtones of Example B: Primarily the existence of the sign (in this case the advert) provides the image's simple denotative meaning: It is an advertisement for after-shave. This is simple information, and in Barthes terms it is a 'message without a code.' However, as was discussed, this code is given connotative meaning, its 'plane of expression' (Barthes) through specific signifiers, all of which have a strong relationship with the cultural context of the advert, and the cultural context of the western male. Thus, it is the signifiers of the adverts masculine colours, the machismo of the subject (another important signifier,) and the artistry of the font, all reinforce the product's intended identity, and allow the invariably western recipient to perceive this sign as an image which is relevant to him, if not relevant to his actual experience, then relevant to the shared perceptions and experience of the society of which he is a part.



Thus the cultural context of the 'Extreme Polo Sport' plays an important role in the recipient perceptions of it. The importance attributed to the context of the sign is also evident in Example D which is an advertisement for 'Xeruus Rouge'-(pour homme). As the name suggests this is a product exclusively aimed at men, as is the aptly named 'Esquire' magazine in which the advertisement is situated. The advertisement is



attractive but unremarkable, typically using an iconic image of the product to identify it, copy to reconfirm its name, and a human subject to lend the product a personality. However, it is this use of its human subject which lends the advert its significant semiotic significance. Unlike the other adverts, which give no impression of the sexuality of the subject, Example D contains a variety of signifiers which all give the subject an unquestionably heterosexual status. In order to place the theme of sex and sexuality on the agenda, the advertisement's softly focused, silver and white photography acts as the signifier which gives both a sense of sensuality to the image and the recipient the appropriate context in which to judge it. Enforcing this sensuality is the associative signifiers of the subjects themselves. Unlike the subjects in the other examples, the male figure in the image is joined by a female, whose nudity and physical contact with him are further signifiers of both the theme of the advert, and the sexuality of the male subject. The positioning, and appearance of both subjects act as further signifiers which help describe the image, and therefore of the product. Both figures are young and in the peak of physical and therefore sexual condition. The naked couple embrace and the woman's head is thrown back in a tableau of orgasmic joy, providing a graphic illustration of her relationship with the man. However, more importantly than the sex being represented is the signified description of the male subject; whose physical strength and apparent ability to please a woman so profoundly portray him as ideal role model for the heterosexual man.

Hence 'Xeryus Rouge,' is portrayed as being for 'homme' in the most original sense, and the signifiers which give the male subject the appropriate resemblance of this, certainly illustrate the fact that the human component of a constructed image 'is a social, not a natural one' (Fiske). For although the subject in real life may be gay, or impotent (or both) for the purposes of the image he is being portrayed as a virile heterosexual. But why is this status important? Answering this question is the textual context in which the advertisement is situated. Esquire is a publication aimed at attracting young, single heterosexual males. On the cover of the edition in which this advertisement was taken is a scantily clad woman, and within its pages are articles on 'The worst fouls in football,' 'US marines on day release in the sex capital of Thailand,' and a calendar of women with the concluding line 'monogamy is unnatural.' Furthermore, it is also interesting to note that an article entitled 'Porn in the UK' is situated within a page of the 'Xeryus Rouge' advert. Therefore if the product is to be successful, it must be compatible with the environment in which it is placed, and hence like its textual context, the sign must be an appropriate 'social construction' (Fiske) of the customer and reader alike. Furthermore, the machismo of the sign does not exist on its own,

or simply within itself. Indeed, it is the same masculine, heterosexual overtones of the text itself, which also contribute to the reader's general perception of the advertisement (and therefore the product.) Hence the magazine acts as a signifier in itself, and therefore we can view the relationship between sign (advert) and text (magazine) as being mutually dependant, since the reader may judge the advert by its context (the magazine) and vice versa.

Therefore example B and D both illustrate Valentin Volosinov's argument that 'when ever a sign is present an ideology is present too.' In the case of these adverts this ideology is one which reflects the values of machismo. Example D reflected, and exalted the sensuous machismo of the white, heterosexual male; attractive, and attracted to the white, beautiful female. Whilst in the case of B, this machismo reflected the courage, athleticism, and individuality of the western male excelling in a predominately white, western sport.



Thus, the aforementioned examples depict the significant semiotic significance of the advertisements' human subjects. But what of the product itself? For in all of the advertisements discussed, the iconic resemblance of the product only fulfils an illustrative function, a means of conveying a basic resemblance of the product whose connotative meanings are portrayed through other means - usually via the subject. However, Example E is an exception to this. Example E is an advert for 'Cool Water' by Davidorf, and it uses its signifiers as a way of giving the product a descriptive tangibility, which is lacking in the other adverts. Unlike other products whose names such as 'Kossak', 'Kuros' or 'Xeryus Rouge' who give their respective products a fantastical, elusive, intangible element, the name 'Cool Water' certainly stands out, signifying the products supposed elemental, natural, pure, qualities. Enforcing this image are signifiers which allow the recipient to view the product as pure and refreshing, and even as drinkable as the water in which the subject is shown to be immersed in. Unlike the iconic image of Extreme Polo Sport (for example) the bottle of Cool water is given physically descriptive qualities, namely through its cold, chilled appearance. This is insured through the droplets of water on the bottle. Thus our prior knowledge and experience is being by manipulated this photographic image. This image implies the tangible, refreshing, pure status of the product by

inducing an indexical description through the relationship between the signifier, the 'droplets' and the signified, which is cold.

In conclusion, this essay has attempted to give a semiotic analysis of advertisements whose signifiers were not only designed to give a favourable and appropriate image of the product, but also, these signifiers were also shown to have a strong relationship with the textual context in which they the signs were located.